



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *Social Forces*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Dec., 1960), pp. 181-186

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2574159>

Accessed: 16/06/2014 05:23

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NATURE AND DIRECTIONS OF SUBURBANIZATION IN THE SOUTH*

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ABSTRACT

The post-automobile era of southern suburbanization has proceeded so swiftly and differently from the traditional national trend, that it has antiquated the long-accepted rural-urban dichotomy for ecological and sociological studies of modern southern communities. Some re-evaluation of concepts and methods is necessary if a systematic theory of community development is to be formulated.

THE TENDENCY of populations to congregate in some spatial arrangement and to develop organized social patterns of living within the limitations imposed by geographic and physiographic factors dates far back into human history. There are evidences as far back as 8,000 to 10,000 years ago that neolithic populations were concentrated in agricultural communities scattered over the land. The first cities—the concentration of large numbers of people within a specifically defined geographical area—are thought to have appeared as early as 6,000 to 5,000 B.C.¹ The rise of cities implies, of course, a surplus of both natural resources and people in the areas lying beyond the defined “city limits.” Thus, the growth and survival of cities have been concomitants of the continuous process of civilization which is characterized by a decreasing direct dependency upon the resources of the natural environment and an increased dependency upon cultural developments. The cultural life of communities, from the earliest agricultural villages to the modern metropolises, has involved an interdependency of social organization, environment, technology, and population. Consequently, a considerable amount of community research has been centered around the various aspects of the so-called “ecological complex”² with respect to their relationship to the growth in the size and number of cities.

* Paper read before the twenty-third annual meeting of the Southern Sociological Society, Atlanta, Georgia, April 8, 1960.

¹ Kingsley Davis, “The Origin and Growth of Urbanization in the World,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 60 (March 1955), pp. 429–437.

² Otis D. Duncan, “Human Ecology and Population Studies” in *The Study of Population*, Philip M. Hauser and Otis D. Duncan (eds.) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 683–684.

Since territorial concentrations of population are readily discernible, the contrast of social organization and modes of living within cities with those in the outlying and sparsely settled agricultural areas was a logical field for intensive sociological inquiry. And for many years, extending into the present, community research has proceeded on a *priori* rural-urban dichotomy.

In recent years, changes in the modes of agricultural production and management, improved transportation facilities, the extension of a network of high-speed highways, and the impact of mass production techniques in industry have accelerated, to an unprecedented degree, the movement of people from agricultural areas, and, to a large extent, the social and physical demarcations between rural and urban settlements have tended to become blurred and indistinct, if not entirely obliterated.

During the 1940–1950 decade, the farm population of the United States suffered its most severe loss (5,489,000), a decrease that amounted to almost twenty-five percent (–23.9 percent), and recent estimates indicate a continued decline. In 1959, the farm population had dropped to 21,200,000, a loss of almost 4,000,000 since 1950. Thus, the farm population for 1960 is likely to represent only 12 percent of the total population compared with 23.2 percent in 1940 and 16.6 percent in 1950.³ Perhaps the most significant fact concerning these changes is that the average annual rate of net migration from the farm areas of –3.5 percent for 1950–1959 has been the same as for 1940–1950 when the total net out-migration from farms was nine and a half million. The effect of this migration trend has been most noticeable

³ *Farm Population Estimates for 1950–1959*, Agricultural Marketing Service (Washington: U. S. Department of Agriculture, February 1960).

in the South. In 1960, the South will have less than half (48.9 percent) of the nation's farm population (12,800,000 of 25,100,000). During 1940–1950, the South accounted for slightly more than half of the nation's 9,500,000 net farm out-migrants, and between 1950–1959, it is estimated the southern net out-migration will again be close to 5,000,000, or 58 percent of the loss by migration in farm population of the United States.⁴

Since all regions in the United States experienced farm population losses, it is apparent that the out-migration does not represent a farm-to-farm redistribution. Nor does the movement represent a direct farm-to-city migration. In the South where the out-migration from farms has been so pronounced, the diversification and mechanization of southern agriculture has released vast numbers of workers "who, if they stay in the region at all, tend to congregate in the nearby smaller urban places where unknown proportions of them are absorbed into secondary and tertiary industries."⁵

This developing resettlement pattern of the rural farm population in areas surrounding large southern cities is quite similar to the process observed in other parts of the nation. However, because southern cities have had their greatest growth during the automobile age, residential areas tend to be dispersed over the countryside, and the extent of this dispersal is probably greater in the South than elsewhere.⁶ The territorial redistribution of population to areas classified as neither farm nor city became so extensive as to render almost meaningless the dichotomous enumeration of population according to rural or urban. In response to the emergent "in between" population, the United States began in 1920 to enumerate a rural nonfarm population which grew from 20,200,000 to 38,700,000 in 1950 (old definition).⁷

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Rudolf Heberle, "The Mainsprings of Southern Urbanization" in *The Urban South*, Rupert B. Vance and Nicholas J. Demerath (eds.) (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1954), p. 23.

⁶ John S. MacLachan and Joe S. Floyd, Jr., *This Changing South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1956).

⁷ In 1950 the Bureau of the Census adopted a new definition of urban to include the densely settled urban fringe around cities of 50,000 or more and unincorporated places of 2,500 or more outside any urban fringe. (Cf. "Introduction," U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population*, Vol. II, Characteristics of the

The growth of the rural nonfarm population has been significant even when the new definition is used. During 1940–1950, rural nonfarm population increased by 32.4 percent compared with an increase of 21.8 percent for the urban population. On the basis of estimates made of residential changes between 1950 and 1958, rural nonfarm population increased 16,772,000 (a 56.1 percent change) while the urban population gained but 9,000,000 (9.4 percent).⁸ Since these latter estimates use the new definitions, the logical inference is that the growth of the nonfarm population "is not the growth of small villages and open country nonfarm populations, but the growth of suburbs around cities of all sizes, and especially around the larger cities. The 1950–1960 decade is proving to be a period of unprecedented suburbanization, or settlement of territory that not only lies outside any city but outside any urban fringe (as defined in 1950) as well."⁹ Although these data were not estimated for the South, it is reasonable to assume that 1940–1950 trend of suburbanization, noted earlier, has continued through the current decade and most probably has accelerated at a rate at least equal to, if not greater than, the national trend. There can be little doubt that "the tendency toward suburban growth is so prevalent that many hundreds of small towns and villages now have tiny suburban fringes, even before they become large enough to be classified as cities by the census."¹⁰

If, as has been suggested, the rural nonfarm population reflects a trend toward suburbanization and a reversal in the centripetal movement to

Population.) The change in definitions had the net effect of adding approximately 7,540,200 persons to the urban population: 6,203,600 in the urban fringe and 1,336,600 in outlying unincorporated places. Because of changes in census definitions, it has been estimated that the 1940–1950 changes, based upon the old definition, "tend to minimize slightly urban growth mildly exaggerate the decline in farm population, and to greatly exaggerate the growth of rural nonfarm population, as these populations are now defined." Donald J. Bogue, *The Population of the United States* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959), p. 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Donald J. Bogue, "The Geography of Recent Population Trends in the United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 44 (June 1954), p. 128.

large cities,¹¹ then the ecologist, demographer, and sociologist may well have to re-examine their current hypotheses about community development especially with regard to urbanization. Although it was stated more than a quarter of a century ago that "little is understood concerning the theory of settlement, the theory of the location of towns and cities, or the laws that determine their size, the density of their population and their internal structure,"¹² a recent review of the status of urban research concluded that its study "indicated the importance of reconsidering many of the 'best ideas' in this area and of proceeding to the construction of urban theory on a broader foundation of empirical research than has yet been provided."¹³

Since the evidence seems quite clear that the traditionally rural South is experiencing a rather rapid change from its long established "cotton-tobacco-corn" culture and is becoming urbanized at a rate greater than other regions in the nation, it can be expected that attention formerly centered about the structure and behavior of rural farm community living will shift to an inclusion of, and emphasis upon, emerging patterns of urban living.¹⁴ But the absence of an established theory that is valid for mid-twentieth century community research poses a number of perplexing questions and problems because fundamental questions still remain unanswered: By what processes do modern communities grow? What factors contribute to their location?¹⁵ This lack of a unified community or urban theory is due, in part, to several factors and does not necessarily imply a haphazard program of community research.

In the first place, there has been no historical

precedent for the modern phenomenon of what has been called "suburbanization." Not only has the rapid growth of suburbs appeared relatively recently but it probably represents an accumulative result of factors that have been operating over a number of years. In the United States, the current growth of its increasing, large nonfarm population has had its origins in processes emanating as far back as the postwar era of World War I. Thus, it is very unlikely when the centripetal rural-urban movement was first observed, that the decentralization or centrifugal urban-rural movement which subsequently developed, nor the current movement from both city and farm to nonfarm areas, could have been anticipated.

In the second place, the former sharp distinctions—both locational and social—between rural and urban communities are disappearing. As the noncity dweller who is not a farmer has become the back-door neighbor of both the farmer and the urbanite, rural and urban have become interpenetrated concepts and "actually, we do not know the limits of ruralism on the urban side of the 'line' or the limits of urbanism on the rural side."¹⁶ In the past, for the most part, rural sociologists have been chiefly concerned with the farm family and village modes of living with some attempts to delineate rural neighborhoods and communities in terms of social contacts and participation in rural organizations.

On the other hand, urban sociology has tended to emphasize ecological patterns and variations in socio-economic characteristics as variables associated with the differential rates of urban growth and relate these factors to the size and distance of the urban place to a large or central city. Many urban studies, perhaps to complete the comparison with rural living, have been attempting to distinguish "urban" as an ecological concept from "urbanism" as a socio-psychological concept. The difficulty of the latter approach has been that "urbanism as a way of life"¹⁷ has become a catch phrase "without noting that Wirth's principal contribution was to dissect 'urbanism' into its elements—which he identified as size, density, and heterogeneity of population—and to investigate

¹¹ It is expected that the proportion of the population living in urban areas will decline from 64 to 61 percent and rural nonfarm population will increase from 24 to 27 percent. (Cf. Donald J. Bogue, *The Population of the United States*, p. 28).

¹² C. H. Cooley, "The Theory of Transportation" (1894) reprinted in *Sociological Theory and Social Research* (New York: Henry Holt & Son, 1930) and quoted in *The Study of Population*, Philip M. Hauser and Otis D. Duncan (eds.), p. 689.

¹³ Philip M. Hauser, "Report on the Work of the Committee on Urbanization," *Social Science Research Council Items*, 13 (December 1959), p. 43.

¹⁴ Alvin Bertrand, *Rural Sociology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1958), chap. 28.

¹⁵ *Needed Urban and Metropolitan Research*, Donald J. Bogue (ed.) (Oxford: Scripps Foundation, Miami University, 1953), p. 38.

¹⁶ Nels Anderson, *The Urban Community* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1959), p. iii.

¹⁷ Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as A way of Life," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (July 1938), pp. 1-24.

how these elementary variables are related to other aspects of community life."¹⁸

With the dynamic growth of the nonfarm population, the question arises whether the traditional and institutional approaches of two sociologies—rural and urban—can and should be merged into a single community sociology based upon a theoretically sound framework of hypotheses and principles. Such a suggestion, implied more than a quarter of a century ago when the concept "rurbanization" was introduced into sociological literature,¹⁹ will merit serious consideration if the academic waters of scientific community research are to be kept clear. As the ecologist, demographer, and the rural and urban sociologist descend upon the nonfarm populations to study community patterns of living, professional jealousies that insist upon one or another approach will do much to delay the construction of a valid community development theory.

A third problem confronting the community researcher is the limitation necessarily imposed upon him by arbitrarily defined areas for which voluminous statistical data are collected and published by the Bureau of the Census. Prior to 1950, with minor qualifications or special rules, urban places are defined as incorporated municipalities of 2,500 or more persons. The new urban definition, adopted for use in the 1950 Census, was expanded to include the densely settled urban fringe around cities of 50,000 or more.²⁰ As was noted earlier, more than seven million additional persons were classified as urban simply as the result of the change in definition; no change of residence was required. Although the new definition of urban has a number of advantages, it still presents obstacles and hazards for those interested in studying suburbanization. Some of the more notable drawbacks that have been pointed out include: (1) It is much more difficult than before for organizations other than the Bureau of the Census to collect and tabulate their own statistics by urban and rural areas; (2) decennial rates of

urban growth can be computed only with difficulty; (3) a great deal of expensive advance preparation is necessary.²¹

These are a few of the general problems with which the community researcher must cope if he is to attempt any meaningful analysis of spatial arrangement and social organizations of the nonfarm population. Historically, he will be studying something relatively new in community development which may still be in its infancy despite its recent phenomenal growth, and which still has not been adequately delimited geographically or socially. This is by no means a simple task. In assessing the research problems and challenges presented by the rapid growth of metropolitan areas and their outlying nonfarm environs in the South, some basic considerations can be easily overlooked or circumvented because of the absence of a structured theory or because of the arduous labor involved in setting up the required elaborate research design for defining and refining the necessary conceptual tools. It is not enough to accept an oversimplified theory that community development moves relentlessly along a rural-urban continuum and to presume that suburbanization—community development in the nonfarm areas—is a natural by-product of urban or metropolitan growth. Neither should suburbanization be lightly dismissed as a "suburbia myth."²² An equally fallacious presumption is that suburbanization has created a mode of living comparable to, yet distinct from, ruralism and urbanism, and that it represents a new American middle-class way of life conceptualized in some of our current literature as the "organization man"²³ who daily commutes between his ranch-style home and his city office.

The sociological approach to community research requires some re-thinking in terms of the purposes for which suburbanization research is to be undertaken and an appraisal of the validity and utility of the concepts to be employed. An axiomatic criterion of any meaningful scientific inquiry is the requirement of a precise and concise

¹⁸ Otis D. Duncan, "Human Ecology and Population Studies" in *The Study of Population*, Philip M. Hauser and Otis D. Duncan (eds.) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 691.

¹⁹ P. A. Sorokin and C. C. Zimmerman, *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1929).

²⁰ Cf. United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population: 1950, Vol. I: Number of Inhabitants, United States Summary*, pp. xviii ff.

²¹ Donald J. Bogue, "Urbanism in the United States, 1950," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 60 (March 1955), p. 476.

²² Bennett M. Berger, "The Myth of Suburbia" (mimeographed paper; Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois, 1959).

²³ Cf. William F. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (Garden City N. Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1959), and A. C. Spector, *The Exurbanites* (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1955).

definition of what is to be investigated. A very cursory review of current literature indicates that probably few concepts have been used more frequently and with less consensus of meaning than suburbanization, perhaps because of the varied usages of the term urbanization.²⁴ A growing interest in the formulation of a more systematic approach to the study of urbanization and its effect upon community settlement patterns is reflected, for example, in the work of the Committee on Urbanization²⁵ and the International Research Center.²⁶

Typical of the awareness for a more unified approach to the study of the process and effects of urbanization has been the considerable amount of current urban research which has been oriented around the proposition advanced some years ago that metropolitan growth is dependent upon the existence of a hinterland.²⁷ In its simplest spatial aspects the community is comprised of two generalized unit parts, the center and the adjoining outlying area.²⁸ One approach along these lines of community research is the use of density gradients as indexes of metropolitan dominance.²⁹ This research suggests the hypothesis that socioeconomic characteristics of community populations will vary along a spatial continuum in direct

relationship to the distance of the community from the central city. Along similar lines, but with an emphasis upon metropolitan dominance as it may result in "the clustering of attributes into compact contiguous subregions,"³⁰ a regional approach has been proposed for the study of urbanization in the South.

On the other hand, there remains a large area of local community research dealing with the phenomenon of suburbanization where a proliferation of ideas exists concerning the connotation of basic concepts. Undoubtedly some of this lack of agreement stems from the absence of an acceptable theoretical framework from which the academic researcher can combat effectively the popularization and distortion of the suburban concept as it has repeatedly appeared in respectable and widely-acceptable magazines and books. Terms and phrases such as "exurbanities," "suburban commuters," "middle-class suburbia," "exploding metropolis," and "the lush new suburban market" have been used in reference to populations scattered about in unincorporated territory and ranging in numbers as high as 30 million.³¹

The community researcher who wishes to investigate the rise and character of southern suburbanization must temper his academic zeal with the recognition that suburbanization is still an ill-defined concept, ecologically and sociologically. To mention a few of the concepts appearing in current sociological journals may serve to illustrate this point. The term "suburb" itself is one "to which no standardized meaning has yet been attached by social scientists. In the literature, suburbs is used almost as loosely by the social scientists as by the layman."³² To replace the commonly used rural-urban dichotomy, for example, three concepts of "metropolitan areas," "urban hinterland," and "rural hinterland" have been suggested³³ and distinctions between "sub-

²⁴ "Urbanization involves basic changes in the thinking and behavior of people and changes in their social values," Nels Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

"Urbanization means an increasing shift from agrarian to industrial, service, and distributive occupations," Rupert B. Vance and Nicholas J. Demerath, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

"Urbanization is a process of population concentration. It proceeds in two ways: the multiplication of points in concentration and the increase in size of, individual concentration," Hope T. Eldridge, "The Process of Urbanization" in *Demographic Analysis*, Joseph J. Spengler and Otis D. Duncan (eds.) (Glencoe Ill.: The Free Press, 1956), pp. 338-343.

²⁵ Philip M. Hauser, "Report on the Work of the Committee on Urbanization," Social Science Research Council Items, 13 (December 1959).

²⁶ International Urban Research Institute, *The World's Metropolitan Areas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959).

²⁷ N. S. B. Gras, *Introduction to Economic History* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1922).

²⁸ Amos H. Hawley, *Human Ecology: A Theory of Community Structure* (New York: Ronald Press, 1950), p. 245.

²⁹ Donald J. Bogue, *The Structure of the Metropolitan Community* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1949).

³⁰ Charles M. Grigg, "A Proposed Model for Measuring the Ecological Process of Dominance," *Social Forces*, 36 (December 1957), pp. 128-131.

³¹ Cf. "The Changing American Market", *Fortune*, 48 (November 1953), p. 128.

³² Henry S. Shryock, Jr., "Population Redistribution Within Metropolitan Areas: Evaluation of Research," *Social Forces*, 35 (December 1956), pp. 154-159.

³³ Lewis Jones, "The Hinterland Reconsidered," *The American Sociological Review*, 20 (February 1955), pp. 40-44.

urbs and satellites"³⁴ and "suburbs and fringe"³⁵ also have been presented. Other concepts associated with "suburb" have been reviewed elsewhere in exploring the feasibility of working out a functional definition of "suburbs" in terms of "metropolitan area rings," "urban fringe," and "incorporated places of 2,500 or more in urban fringes."³⁶ In part, the difficulty in formulating an adequate and acceptable definition of "suburb" lies in the fact that whatever criteria may be selected they cannot be related to some specifically delineated population aggregate which can be spatially segregated. Recent studies, employing ecological or socio-psychological approaches in an attempt to identify and analyze suburban phenomenon,³⁷ still have left unanswered the fundamental question, "How and by what means can suburbs be territorially delimited?"

While conceptual and methodological difficulties are to be expected in a research area so relatively new as suburbanization which is still in the process of rapid expansion, especially in the South, the community researcher interested in the nature and extent of suburbanization cannot afford to be like the hunter who, when his companion was accidentally wounded by someone, ran off to find the culprit. Although the lack of a precise definition of suburb is a conceptual hindrance, the fact remains, notwithstanding the obstacles which have been pointed out, that suburbanization as a

concomitant of the rapid growth of the nonfarm population is making a tremendous impact upon community development throughout the South.

Despite the lack of empirical studies, sufficient evidence has been presented already to indicate that urbanization and suburbanization—the movement of large numbers of persons to nonfarm areas around cities throughout the South—are proceeding much more swiftly than in the nation as a whole. Not only has the rate of increase been high, but the indications seem to be that southern urbanization and suburbanization may be following a pattern not observed heretofore in other regions.

The hypothesis suggested here is that the South has experienced a remarkable redistribution of its population primarily due to changes in agricultural production; that the large number of agricultural out-migrants who have remained in the region have not been attracted to the larger industrial cities but to the many smaller towns and cities and nonfarm areas scattered about the region; and that industry has tended to move to rural territory rather than rely upon drawing labor to urban-located plants.

What appears to be needed, then, is a vigorous community research program that will seek to test these assumptions concerning the forms and processes of suburbanization in the New Urban South.

Whether segmental studies of small communities or areas or studies along lines of a larger regional model³⁸ will be most fruitful cannot be determined until they are undertaken and their findings empirically validated. Certainly no one study will provide a comprehensive theory of community development, nor will it adequately clarify the present state of confusion concerning basic concepts. Studies should be undertaken both for theoretical and practical reasons.

If such research is carefully planned and the obstacles confronting it are fully understood, it should make a significant contribution to the formulation of a systematic and formalized theory of community growth and development.

³⁸ Charles M. Grigg, *loc. cit.*

³⁴ Leo F. Schnore, "Satellites and Suburbs," *Social Forces*, 36 (December 1957), pp. 121-127.

³⁵ Richard A. Kurtz and Joanne B. Eicher, "Fringe and Suburb: A Confusion of Concepts," *Social Forces*, 37 (October 1958), pp. 32-38.

³⁶ Henry S. Shryock, Jr., *op. cit.*

³⁷ Walter T. Martin, "Ecological Change in Satellite Rural Areas," *American Sociological Review*, 32 (April 1957), pp. 173-183; Sylvia F. Fava, "Suburbanization As A Way of Life," *American Sociological Review*, 21 (February 1956), pp. 34-38; Basil G. Zimmer and Amos H. Hawley, "Suburbanization and Church Participation," *Social Forces*, 37 (May 1959), pp. 348-354; E. Gartly Jaco and Ivan Belknap, "Is a New Family Form Emerging in the Urban Fringe?" *American Sociological Review*, 18 (October 1953), pp. 551-557.